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AUTHOR Goddard, J. Tim
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ABSTRACT

Outcomes of the District Wide School Improvement Program (DWIP), a plan to improve Native education in Saskatchewan, are described in this paper. Initiated by the Prince Albert Tribal Council (PATC) and the Lac La Ronge Indian Band (LLRIB), the school improvement model is a community-based developmental model designed to sensitize schools to their cultural environment. Needs assessment surveys were mailed to 550 parents, students, teachers, staff, band councillors, and school administrators, of whom 334 responded, a 61 percent response rate. Major concerns of constituents included teacher and program evaluation, lack of communication, the student dropout rate, the low status of Cree language and culture, lack of consistent student performance expectations, support for special needs students, insufficient funding, and lack of school/community collaboration. Based on the premise that the effective school system works with its environment, program goals include upholding the right to education, establishing local/Band governance, improving academic standards, and maintaining the cultural awareness of the Cree Nation. (35 references) (LMI)

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# THE DISTRICT WIDE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROJECT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

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REPORT TO THE PRINCE ALBERT TRIBAL COUNCIL - EDUCATION DIVISION

4 NOVEMBER 1991

# THE DISTRICT WIDE IMPROVEMENT PROJECT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES BY THE LAC LA RONGE INDIAN BAND

J. TIM GODDARD
SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION
LAC LA RONGE INDIAN BAND
P. O. BOX 480
LA RONGE
SASKATCHEWAN SOJ 1L0

Tel : (306) 425-2183
FAX : (306) 425-2590

Native education has often been perceived as a low status cousin of the 'regular' (i.e middle class, (sub)urban, white) education system. More (1984) has noted that "the academic achievement levels of Indian students are not declining but continue to be disastrously low ... massive improvements in the quality of education of Indian students is absolutely essential" (pp.3-4). This situation is often attributed to the past policies of many different federal governments and to a succession of poorly conceived and badly implemented school programs. Anger and distrust generated by these programs were among the many reasons which lead to the development of Band-controlled education systems in the early 1970s (Goddard, 1988). The LLRIB took control of the Chief James Roberts School in Sucker River in 1973 (Roberts & Goddard, 1991) and of other schools shortly afterward. The LLRIB now operates seven schools of various sizes, ranging from a small Nursey-Kindergarten program with an enrolment of 38 students to a large Nursery-Grade 12 facility with an enrolment of 403 students. The continued improvement of Band schools is a priority with the LLRIB, as is the development and implementation of an effective schools program.

In September 1990, education personnel from the Prince Albert Tribal Council [PATC] and the LLRIB commenced planning for a District Wide School Improvement Project [DWIP]. This project involved 22 Band operated schools within the 12 First Nations who constitute the PATC. A community based development model was utilized to ensure that the content of the school and community surveys was based on local concerns, needs and perceptions of what constitutes a good school(PATC, 1990). At a PATC sponsored meeting in October, representatives from each Band school met and discussed the issues of school effectiveness. Fifteen specific areas were identified as a result of these discussions. A small steering committee, which included this author, then examined a number of other models (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1990; National Study of School Evaluation, 1983; Onion Lake Indian Band, 1990; Saskatchewan Education, 1989) and structured the Needs Assessment Survey questionnaires.

These documents were then reviewed at the community level to clarify statements, remove jargon and compile a standardized Cree translation of certain terms and concepts. As a result of these discussions a second draft was prepared and was once again presented to community representatives for their consideration, review and revision. A final revised draft was then prepared by the steering committee. The revised draft of the DWIP survey was administered by the LLRIB in April 1991. A total of 550 Needs Assessment surveys were distributed to parents, senior students, teachers and other education staff, Band Councillors and School Committee members. 334 completed surveys were returned for a response rate of 60.72%. An analysis of the surveys was conducted by the Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit. The results of the analysis were debated at the annual LLRIB School Committees Conference and twelve major concerns were identified and discussed. A School Improvement Review Committee, with representation from a variety of stakeholder groups, was then established to review these concerns and to develop strategies to improve the LLRIB education program.

The membership of the LLRIB constitutes almost 20% of the total membership of the PATC. The majority of the 4832 members of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band (INAC, 1991) live in six reserve communities in Northern Saskatchewan. Other LLRIB members live off-reserve in various towns and cities, or in other reserve communities. The LLRIB operates seven Band controlled schools with a total Nursery - Grade 12 student population of 953 (Goddard, 1991b). This is the largest Band controlled school system in Saskatchewan and is comparable, in size, to many provincial School Divisions. There are almost 4000 students enrolled in First Nations schools within the PATC (Goldade, 1991) and so the LLRIB accounts for approximately one quarter of the total enrolment. With 50% of the Band population being under 21 years of age, and 24.83% being 9 years of age or younger (Campbell, 1991), the student enrolment in LLRIB schools is expected to increase significantly over the next decade.

As previously mentioned, the LLRIB found that there were twelve major areas of concern identified through DWIP. The remainder of this article describes each of those concerns and then explains what steps the LLRIB has taken, or is taking, to combat those concerns. The twelve issues are not described in any particular order as the LLRIB feels that all are equally important. Neither do the actions taken by the LLRIB constitute some sort of recipe for effectiveness. Rather, these are specific strategies developed by the LLRIB in order to address specific issues identified in LLRIB schools and communities.

The area of teacher evaluation and supervision was one area of concern. A clinical supervision model, such as that described by Castetter (1986, p.323), requires a great deal of time if it is to be successful. This process tends to utilize a check list format and does not provide teachers with the means of identifying and remediating their own professional needs. The use of critical reflection and the treatment of teachers as individuals (Sparkes, 1991) was often ignored in favour of "the fiction" that evaluation denoted expertise on the part of the evaluator (Smith & Blase, 1991, p. 18). Working on a variant of the non-directive, collaborative and directive model of supervision (Glickman, 1989) a three-strand approach to teacher evaluation was developed and implemented in LLRIB schools in September 1991. The initial reaction of teachers to this model has been positive and it is hoped that evaluation based primarily on professional issues and development will be a successful alternative to the clinical model.

A second concern was the apparent lack of communication between classroom and resource room teachers in the development and implementation of Individual Education Programs [IEP], and the exclusion of parents from this process. Accordingly, a protocol was developed which includes teachers, guidance counsellors, parents and the student in the development of an IEP, sets strict timelines for placement in a resource room program, and requires teachers to work closely with resource room teachers in the delivery of the IEP. This protocol will result in the abolition of the concept that resource rooms are a "dumping ground" in which students can be left for an extended period of time. Rather, classroom and resource teachers will work together to develop and implement a structured program for each individual, and will assess the results of this program after a six week placement.

Also of concern was the high drop-out rate of students, particularly in the middle years (grades 6 - 9). Of the total school age population, a statistical survey discovered that 750 Band members were not enrolled in educational programs (Goddard, 1991b). This, in part, was traced to an inconsistent policy on student promotion and retention in grade which had inadvertently encouraged students to leave school (Kalyn, 1991). A policy was developed and implemented which established criteria and timelines for 'student at-risk' intervention practices and which placed the decision on whether or not a student should be retained in grade in the hands of the parents. This policy was introduced at the beginning of the 1991-1992 school year. In order to determine the actual numbers of school leavers and to develop a tracking system for these students, and to attempt to bridge the gap (or rather, chasm) between the school and postschool environments, a submission for a Social Studies and Humanities Research Council grant was prepared and submitted (Goddard & Kalyn, 1991). If this submission is successful then the LLRIB will work with the University of Saskatchewan to conduct preliminary research into this area of concern.

A fourth concern was the apparent low status of Cree language and Cree culture within the school program. This view was reinforced by a program review (Highway, 1991) and the administration of a language dominance test to kindergarten students (Eby, 1977; Neufeld, 1991). The loss of a vernacular language within one or two generations, or diglossia (Dorais, 1989), is well documented. The LLRIB focus on the necessity of maintaining the Cree language


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will perhaps serve to reverse this trend. A Cree Culture Facilitator was hired to provide system wide support to teachers involved in the teaching of Cree language and culture. A related concern was the perceived lack of curriculum development generally. The LLRIB has a bilingual and bicultural approach to education and a stated philosophy that pride, culture, skills and values (LLRIB, 1988) should be integrated within all subject areas at the N - 9 levels. However, this is perceived to exist only on paper and the cautions of Cummings (n.d.) on the effectiveness of bilingual programs have not been examined. Curriculum development committees, with appropriate release time and resources to hire substitute teachers, have been established to examine these issues and to review and revise the LLRIB Integrated Curriculum Guide (Roberts & Goddard, 1991). This process will also allow for new provincial curriculum initiatives, such as the Common Essential Learnings (Saskatchewan Education, 1988), to be incorporated into the LLRIB curriculum. Further, the integration of Native and western conceptual paradigms (i.e. Colorado, 1988; King,1991) will allow for curricula to include 'the best of both worlds' and help prepare students for life both on and off the reserves.

Another major concern identified through DWIP was the lack of consistent expectations for student performance. These issues are also being addressed through various working committees and will lead to the establishment of common core subject examinations at the grades 6 and 9 levels and the empowerment of teachers, community members and school committee members within the educational system. One committee is developing system-wide examinations in the core subjects, to be administered at the Grade 6 and Grade 9 levels. These examinations will form but one part of the assessment process and will not be used, in isolation, to determine whether a child should be promoted or retained in grade. Questions pertaining to "the usefulness of multiple-choice tests, the cultural bias of tests, "teaching to the test", and the lack of plan to improve poor test scores" (Jennings, 1991, p. 3) are being considered during the development and construction of the examinations. The LLRIB, in moving towards the development of a standardized examination system at certain key points in the education process, is reflecting developments in the international arena. Countries such as the United States (Jennings, 1991), France and England (Gozzer, 1990) are also attempting to identify key objectives at different stages of the K-12 program and to develop national tests which relate to these objectives.

Related to both the preceeding issues was the concern that the LLRIB operates in a vacuum insofar as comparisons with other educational programs are concerned. The DWIP results indicated a need for the LLRIB to arrange for an objective, external evaluation of its programs in an effort to determine how they compare with LLRIB goals and with programs in other jurisdictions. Arrangements have been made with INAC (Regina) to conduct a comprehensive series of school and program reviews. This process, which might correctly be termed an audit, will take place between january and June of 1992. The reports of these reviews will, when considered together with the results of the DWIP surveys, provide the LLRIB with the data required to review and revise the 5 year plan.

Another area of concern was the belief that not all students who require special help receive the appropriate assistance. The LLRIB is proud of its special education programs and feels that the needs of those students who are designated as 'high cost' are being met (Goddard, 1991a). There remain, however, many students who require a wide range of intervention strategies that the LLRIB is unable to provide. Through a series of shared contribution agreements all Bands within the PATC assist in the funding of various centralized programs, including access to a number of consultants. From the LLRIB perspective, however, this system has its weaknesses as the types of individual required are not presently employed through PATC. The Band continues to attempt to access the resources necessary to hire speech and language pathologists, speech therapists and other special needs support personnel. Unfortunately the federal Department of

Indian Health and Medical Services refuses to accept this type of assistance as a medical problem and refer all enquiries to INAC-Education staff. They, in turn, maintain that these funds have been decentralized to the Tribal Councils. The PATC, having to deal with the needs of twelve member Bands, has prioritized staffing to meet the needs of the majority and thus has no spare funding to hire additional consultants. The LLRIB continues to attempt to access funding to provide these urgently required services.

A ninth area of concern was the need for extra support staff, and for more funding to be made available to provide staff training programs. As the enrolment in LLRIB schools continues to grow at a rate faster than new facilities can be constructed so one outcome is increased class size and a higher pupil-teacher ratio. One way to combat this is through the employment of teacher aides. The LLRIB has funded the delivery of two parts of a three level Teacher Aid training program, offered in conjunction with Northlands College. The third level will be offered in 1992. All uncertified Band education staff are required to take thisprogram and have been joined by a number of teacher aides from other Band and provincial schools. The continued success of this and other training programs, and the continued hiring of additional staff, relies upon expanded funding agreements with INAC. Another concern related to funding was identified as being the perceived centralization of the budget process. Although the total budget is set at the system level, the actual prioritization of this funding has been decentralized to schools. It is perceived that principals do not adequately involve staff in the setting of budget priorities. LLRIB principals have been made aware of this concern and requested to involve a greater number of staff in the process for the next fiscal year.

Also of concern was the perception that overall funding levels for education are insufficient. Although over 80% of the replies from members of the Band Council and School Committees agreed with the statement that "there is adequate funding for quality education", only 37% of teaching staff concurred. This discrepancy may be the result of teachers only being aware of classroom issues while councillors and school committee members are aware of overall funding. The LLRIB has determined to examine this issue and to make teachers more aware of the committment it makes to the education system.

The isolation of individual School Committees from each other, and the lack of community involvement in the decision making process, was the final area of concern. The Ad Hoc Committee, with representation from each of the six LLRIB School Committees, is discussing the validity and effectiveness of developing an Education Authority to govern the operations of the LLRIB education system. Such a body, if one is implemented, would have certain responsibilities delegated to it by the Chief and Band Council. The scope and mandate of such an Education Authority, and the powers devolved to it, will be the subject of much discussion over the coming months. In the interim the Ad Hoc Committee has invited the two band councillors with education portfolios to attend its meetings and provide input into the developmental process. The eleven issues described above are also discussed at Ad Hoc Committee meetings in order to improve lines of commuication and better inform staff, parents and community members of the steps the LLRIB is taking to improve its school system.

The model of school improvement implemented by the LLRIB is similar to that applied in the Outer Hebrides (Coombs, 1985), Papua New Guinea (Guthrie, 1980) and other jurisdictions which have attempted to recover their cultural identity after years of being subject to a system of education imposed by a colonial power. This process involves making schools more sensitive to the environment within which they exist. In a First Nations community the environment is not restricted to the real or physical (resources, facilities, people, etc.) but also includes the abstract and metaphysical (cultural paradigms, Aboriginal world-views, kinship and other

human relationships, and so forth). Therefore new paradigms of effectiveness are required.

The community based development model utilized by the LLRIB has potential for all schools wishing to implement school improvement programs. The LLRIB is pleased to have been involved in the DWIP process and to have worked with PATC Education Division staff such as Derrol LeBlanc, Harvey Knight, John Stobbe, Rita Highway and Diane Knight, as well as Darlene Spiedal of the Wahpetan First Nation, in the construction of the Needs Assessment Surveys. The input from a variety of committed community and school representatives, and the contributions of all members of the steering committee, were significant in ensuring the success of this process. The analysis of the survey results has provided the LLRIB with many targets on which to focus. Throughout the year, as different strategies are implemented, the School Improvement Review Committee will be monitoring the effects of these processes. School improvement is not a goal but a process, for excellence is always to be striven for and yet is seldom achieved.

In addressing the human, technical and conceptual processes of education (Sergiovanni, Burlingame, Coombs & Thurston, 1980) through a systematic, decentralized and 'bottom-up' series of school improvement initiatives the LLRIB is attempting to follow Brameld's dictum that "the effective school works with, not against, its environment" (1955, p.155). Any attempt to develop and implement school improvement plans must incorporate the abstract as well as the concrete if the process is to be successful. It is not sufficient to simply transplant a process developed for mainstream society into a First Nations environment.

The National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations recently circulated a copy of a letter in which he stated that "education is an inherant aboriginal right and a treaty right" (Mercredi, 1991). The LLRIB concurs and also believes that this right must be exercised at, and controlled by, the local or Band level of governance. The school improvement model implemented by the LLRIB hopes to overcome the effects of a past quasi-colonial system and improve academic standards while maintaining the cultural uniqueness of the Cree Nation. It is recommended that the other eleven Bands within the PATC consider administering the DWIP surveys within their communities, that they have the results analyzed by the Educational leadership Unit, and that they then involve school staff and community members in the development, implementation and continuous evaluation of school improvement strategies.



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## THE PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF DWIP

Prior to September 1990

LLRIB Superintendent of Education completes first full round of school visits and school committee meetings

Community perceptions indicate that LLRIB schools are not failing but are not doing as well as they should

LLRIB adopts 'change agent' theory which expects school improvement to be based on community needs & to involve all stakeholders in the conceptualization, development, strategic planning, implementation and evaluation processes

Prior to September 1990

INAC writes to Tribal Councils

PATC Education Division staff discuss idea of coordinating school audits

PATC Education Division staff develop concept of DWIP

September 1990

A chance conversation between the Assistant Director (PATC) and Superintendent of Education (LLRIB) identifies that both organizations are on a similar path

A planning session is attended by PATC education staff and LLRIB Superintendent of Education

October 1990

A two day planning workshop is organized, with representatives from all 12 PATC Bands and most of the 22 Band-controlled schools

Initial areas of concern are identified and discussed

A Steering Committee consisting of PATC education staff Derrol LeBlanc, Rita Highway, Diane Knight, John Stobbe and Harvey Knight, together with LLRIB Superintendent of Education Tim Goddard and Wahpeton representative Darlene Spiedal, is established

November 1990

The Steering Committee drafts a preliminary questionnaire

December 1990

The questionnaire is sent to all members of the planning workshop for their review and revision

January 1991
Using the feedback, the Steering Committee drafts a second questionnaire

February 1991
Two planning workshops are held, one in Prince Albert and one in La Ronge, to review the second draft of the Needs Assessment Survey

March 1991
The Steering Committee meets and drafts a final copy of the Needs Assessment Survey

The LLRIB agrees to pilot this study

April 1991
A training and awareness workshop for LLRIB principals is held

A training and awareness workshop for LLRIB School Committee members is held

April / May 1991
The Needs Assessment Survey is administered to teaching and support staff, parents, senior students, Band Councillors, School Committee members and community residents in LLRIB communities

May / June 1991
The completed Needs Assessment Surveys are analyzed at the Educational Leadership Unit of the University of Saskatchewan

June 1991
The results of the analyses are presented to the annual LLRIB School Committee Conference ; twelve major areas of concern are identified

July 1991
LLRIB Education Branch staff discuss and review the analyses, the written comments and the twelves areas of concern

August 1991
The twelve major areas of concern are presented to the annual LLRIB teacher orientation

September 1991 to present
Action is taken to develop strategies to address the areas of concern